

SECURITIZATION OF IMMIGRATION IN EUROPE AND ROLE OF POPULIST RIGHT-WING PARTIES

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Abstract

In most of the western European countries, Populist Radical Right-wing parties have developed themselves as a permanent feature of their party-structures. Their political success is their resistance to immigrants and multicultural societies. Immigration is their central concern as subscribed by nearly all radical-right populist groups. Though the far-right parties join government coalitions, social scientists consider them to have minimal policy performance. This article, therefore, looks at European Islamophobia and its relation with migration in the EU through the lens of Securitization theory by examining security and political aspects. The content analysis is chosen as a methodology to understand securitization strategy when it comes to identify and separate securitizing actors from audiences. It also analyses the multifaceted ways through which right-wing parties contribute towards maintaining and expanding Islamophobic discourses by securitizing migration.

Keywords: Securitization, Migration, Islamophobia, Actors, Audience.

Introduction

Migrants and refugees are believed to have contributed much towards the rise of Populist Radical Right-wing (PRR) parties in Europe. After the 9/11 incident, European right-wing populist elites articulated the threat of xenophobia and somehow managed to replace it with communalism, particularly, against European Muslims. They consider the Muslims as a real source of internal problems in European countries and blatantly connect them to various crimes and corruption. Right-wing populists also consider immigration a cultural, religious, economic, political, and security threat. A relationship being drawn between immigration and extremism is ambiguous and nuanced.¹ In the post-9/11 context, European politicians and media have associated the concepts of war, terror, disintegration, secession, and assimilation to Islam and created segregated discourses against the Muslims in Europe. This radical approach towards Muslims spreading across the European continent is generally known as Islamophobia.

Presently, about 25 million Muslims live in 28 member states of the EU. The vast majority of these Muslims went there in search of jobs or were required to work in

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sectors commonly referred to as difficult, dirty, and risky. In the 1980s, they were viewed as Muslims, not as Moroccan, Syrian or Turkish refugees, etc., but gradually, they were accused of challenging the social structure of European societies. The terrorist attacks by small groups and radicalization of thousands of native Muslims added fuel to Europe's growing anti-Muslim sentiment. The succeeding French Presidents had also attempted to place a French stamp on Islam to ensure that the diverse Muslim culture became well-suited for their secular values. President Macron was no exception who promised to create an *Islam de France*, which led to strict but provocative legislation.

Initially, the intended legislation was portrayed as a shield to the Republic and French ideals, which were considered under threat. Although the speech of President Macron was a kind of curtain-raiser against separatist attacks in which white supremacist groups were involved, the French Muslims had a worry that this legislation would label them wrongly. Many analysts considered that the legislation was specifically targeted at Muslims, thus, caused a sharp debate even before it was implemented in 2020. Today, a considerable division is taking place in the French society, where many people are welcoming the so-called anti-separatism drive of the government, and on the other hand, Muslims, a sizeable minority group in France, fear it could be detrimental for European Muslims. A recent Odoxa-Dentsu poll indicates that many French citizens support legislation on anti-separatism, though nearly half are worried that tensions within the country could deepen.²

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, has strongly condemned such a nonproductive political move made by the French President, which is not only provoking but also causing further polarization in Europe, the last thing the world desires. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has also slammed President Macron over his anti-Muslim policies and expressed that “what can one say about a head of state who handles millions of members of various faith groups this way; first of all, have mental checks.” The Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Nayef Falah Mubarak Al-Hajraf, called Macron’s words irresponsible and feared that they would increase the spread of an ideology of hate. The Jordanian Foreign Ministry said that the French actions against Muslims are discriminatory and misleading attempts to connect Islam to terrorism.³

In Europe, PRR elements often try to find common grounds in order to take advantage of unfavorable circumstances for their political gains, thus, propagating Islam as a religion of violence and Muslims as terrorists.⁴ PRR parties also share a common agenda that has been characterized by nativism, imperialism, and authoritarianism.⁵ The essential aspects of right-wing narratives are usually applied to religious perspectives, though Islamophobia is, in fact, cultural xenophobia. Now, questions arise, how Islamophobic discourses have been framed and administered as a threat to safety regarding migration in Europe and how PRR parties are taking advantage of linking Islam with counter-terrorism discussions.⁶ This debate in Europe has been securitized with immigration policies, gradually taking national security

concerns into account.⁷ Therefore, this article looks at European Islamophobia and its relation with migration in the EU through the lens of Securitization theory by examining its security and political aspects.

Islamophobia is a multidisciplinary but challenging subject when it comes to social and behavioral sciences. Due to its multifaceted nature, it has been perceived as a social, financial, political, and legal challenge, especially in the context of Europeanization. It is, therefore, important to explore the evolving pattern of literature on Islamophobia and securitization of Muslim communities as a security threat to Europe that eventually give rise to hate offenses and branding Muslims as "others" in European society.⁸ This paper, therefore, analyzes the multifaceted ways through which PRR parties contribute towards maintaining and expanding Islamophobic discourses by securitizing migration. The content analysis is chosen as a methodology to understand securitization strategy when it comes to identify and separate securitizing actors from audiences.

Securitization Process in Europe

The actor-audience dichotomy is posited by traditional securitization scholars that securitization is a multidirectional process in which it is often difficult to distinguish securitizing actors from audiences. Since many individuals, groups, and organizations in Europe have securitized migration makeup and assume various roles at different times, they can take on both roles simultaneously or change their roles over time. There are many but complex ways through which an issue can become a security threat. Scholars from the Paris school of thought recognize the need to disaggregate the concept of audience (who is being convinced?) and examine the interaction between the audience and securitizing actors (does securitizing actor always convince the audience?). They emphasize that context does matter and speech acts often take objective threats into account. They contend that securitization is an interactive process involving an assemblage of actors. However, in 2008, Leonard and Kaunert suggested a "general and unified framework that can account for the existence and respective impact of various audiences on the securitization of an issue."⁹

The securitization process in Europe illustrates an issue in media's salience, determines its causes, takes decisions, and prescribes solutions.¹⁰ The matter is usually defined by an individual, typically a politician, as a threat to a given security level.¹¹ In this era of media, wars are not waged with bombs and planes only but with video and sound bites as well. The war of words is an incisive study of linguistic battlefield sampling the stories told about the event (such as September 11) and explain how to build consensus. Silberstein traces the major cultural struggles that erupted after the 9/11 incident, capturing campaigns for hearts, minds, wallets, and votes of Americans. The attacks on intellectuals for their alleged attitude of blaming the US for a symbiotic relationship with terrorists and al Qaeda and the Taliban's (mis)representations were used to justify the military action.¹² Under the take on securitization, the moral judgment emphasizes that the act of speech means morally adequate action to protect

the referent object, whereas, the protection of the referent object is endangered by an unethical action. The prescription of solutions that involve extraordinary measures is a vital aspect of securitization. An apology for undermining normal democratic political processes is offered by the ordinary features of the proposed securitization steps.

Theoretical Aspects of Securitization

Securitization acts as a weapon in democratic regimes for politicians¹³ to violate basic principles of democracy. The cascading activation is one mechanism by which this violation occurs.¹⁴ This mechanism ensures that elites and other members of the ruling echelons imagine their discourse frames. These frames are then passed on to mass media organizations, where they are modified until embodied as frames of media content. The media-content frames are then transmitted to audiences, where frames are internalized, depending on the degree of cultural congruence and certain other factors. This process is parallel to the setting of Scheufele's frame.¹⁵ As Vultee¹⁶ indicates that cascading activation provides a medium for incorporating securitization into framing, securitization is, therefore, an organizational concept invoked by political actors and, most significantly, exacerbated or tamed by media in an attempt to channel the ways in which problems are taken into account.¹⁷ Watson pointed out that because protection appears as much as framing, the theory has not received broader attention from European scholars.¹⁸ He further added that "not only are these two work bodies compatible and based on strongly overlapping theoretical and normative roles but also security acts like freedom and injustice as a different master framework, therefore, the securitization principle can be usefully understood as freedom and injustice."¹⁹

In line with D'Angelo's demand for paradigmatic eclecticism in framing studies,²⁰ the proposal of Watson is also in line with the same justification.²¹ The inclusion of scholarships for framing and securitization is likely to provide such a theoretical and epistemological vehicle that helps to illuminate complex social reality phenomena. The primary strength of the theory of securitization is its ability to clarify threat-narrative development and introduction of security measures to deal with unique threats. Therefore, the main theoretical strength of the theory of securitization is its ability to justify why regardless of the actual existence of an observable empirical threat, such policy interventions are implemented to deal with a perceived class of threats.

There are two central areas of securitization theory that have been surprisingly under-theorized: (a) the nature and roles of the audience and securitizing actor; (2) the relationship between multiple overlapping security issues. However, despite its prominence, the securitization theory has been widely criticized for its under-theorization of what it calls actors and audiences. According to the writers of the theory, Buzan, Waeber, and de Wilde (1998), securitization occurs when a securitizing agent (policymaker) persuades a target audience to accept that a particular public issue is sufficiently threatening to prompt an immediate policy

response to alleviate it.²² While subsequent scholars have widely disagreed over who exactly constitutes a securitizing actor or audience,²³ the key idea is that certain actors play a declaratory and persuasive role in the labeling of a particular issue as a security issue and others play an assenting role by conferring agreement and enabling the securitizing actor to achieve its proposed policy to deal with the security issue.

The most important and common trait of all PRR parties in Europe is their nativist approach and preference for an exclusionist migration policy.²⁴ PRR parties favor more stringent measures than are currently in effect in the field of acceptance of immigrants and integration of immigrants.²⁵ The centrality of migration policy for the radical right-wing suggests that it is important to evaluate its impact on the results of policies in this area for a comprehensive evaluation of its consequences.²⁶ In many European countries, given the rise of traditional parties and their interference by addressing immigration as a prominent political issue and mobilizing anti-immigration feelings, PRR parties particularly affect electoral competition.²⁷ The effective mobilization against immigration prevents dominant parties from ignoring the restricted preferences of moderate voters, thus, liberal immigration policy becomes a major electoral threat for them.²⁸ In the face of increasing concern in the political consequences of electoral success, current studies on political success remain at their core problem. There is a trend, however, that shows that they have a significant effect on the policies of the government.²⁹

Media Discourse on Immigration and Asylum

Media is not isolated from the subject as several research works have indicated that political discussion and media discourses are tightly intertwined. While reviewing the literature on the issue of immigration, it reveals that there is a shortage of migrant voices in the news and political elites generally control the press coverage. Jens and Wolling find that the notion of resentment also affects media coverage of the refugee crisis.³⁰ The prevalent theme in media and migration research constantly attract economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers without identifying them separately. Nickels states that four frames are used to respond to the issue of refugees and asylum by media and political actors, i.e., administrative, genuine, human dignity, and return home.³¹ There is a high level of internal and external group consensus in terms of how issues interpret discourses in the analysis of media and politics. According to him, the main difference between media and political structure is that media focuses on the humanitarian side of the asylum, while political actors focus on the legal side.³²

Political Discourse on Asylum and Refugee Crisis

The European External Migration Regulation is the result of pressure from domestic and European policy failures and migratory flow changes.³³ The refugee crisis of 2015 and its causes have been perceived differently across Europe. The humanitarian movements are politically responsible for identifying a crisis and legitimizing the

perceived urgency in media and political debate including those steps that have been taken in recent years.³⁴ The relationship and experience of each nation-state with the EU as a common force have supported much of the political dialogue, divergent national discourses, and answers to the crisis. Radu argues that European leaders have tacitly fueled intra-EU cleavages between member states as well as public attachment to far-right xenophobic agendas through their emotional and solidarity-centered rhetoric.³⁵ European unity has been rebuilt in this context through political processes linked to the refugee crisis. Furthermore, the ethno-nationalist culture of fear promoted by far-right parties has led to frightening discourses on asylum seekers. In all situations, the issue has been designed according to national points of view, not unions.³⁶ The central characteristics of these parties, i.e., populism, nativism, and authoritarianism, pose a major threat not only to the fundamental values of the country but also to the European values of peace, freedom, democracy, justice, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.³⁷

The ongoing immigration crisis has exposed the EU's vulnerabilities in terms of migrant flow management and legal system. Many civil societies, organizations, and academics have criticized the EU's actions for its security measures, especially in terms of border management, by arguing that the securitization of migration is not the answer to the crisis. In both legislative and policy terms, the European asylum scheme is a relatively advanced regional security mechanism.³⁸ However, the same structure lacks a framework for equally distributing accountability among the member states as well as legal mechanisms by which it can be accessed by individuals in need of protection. The European Security Strategy (2003), the Internal Security Strategy (2010), and the European Security Agenda (2015) describe the main internal security goals of the EU, often taking into account the particular circumstances in which these policies have been applied. The connection between security and migration, however, is clear, highlighting irregular migration as a security challenge and emphasizing the role of border management in the administration of migration. In this context, the EU mainly focuses on irregular migration as a threat to its internal security despite the fact that irregular migration represents only a small proportion of the total migration to European territory.³⁹ Migration policies have a small effect on structural variables that drive migration, therefore, decision-makers need to move beyond migration policies in order to more efficiently monitor migration processes.

At present, security issues alongside domestic, political, cultural, and economic factors are at the center of EU migration policies. There is a need to rethink what security entails; only securitizing borders does not lead to security and stability. In addition, the existing narrow definition of securitization takes focus away from local and national solutions that are already present, but which, owing to the nuanced nature of securitizing actors and audiences, do not fit into the current European political debate on immigration. However, long-term sustainable strategies should be followed when using the security discourse. Throughout its various regulations and directives, the EU specifies universal principles, but the real application of asylum and

migration policy rests with the member states, which must ensure that their national legislation complies with both the EU and state regulations.⁴⁰

Role of PRR Parties in Securitization Process

The involvement of PRR parties has become more common in European politics, creating favorable circumstances for Euroscepticism, xenophobia, and intolerance. Since 2013, the far-right parties have been actively participating in national and local elections.⁴¹ Their successes can be explained by several factors, such as electoral laws and party coalitions, levels of immigration and unemployment, levels of gender and education of voters, and discontent with the functioning of mainstream parties and democratic institutions.⁴² However, the data of well-established PRR parties (e.g., Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, and Italy) and emerging PRR parties (e.g., the UK, Hungary, and Sweden)⁴³ shows causal ties between dependence on particular media outlets and increased probability of voting for a far-right party.

The comparative content-analysis of news coverage across European countries,⁴⁴ confirms signs of a north-south divide, where more political, interpretive, and actor-focused news stand out in southern Europe. The northern European countries, on the other hand, have more news coverage focusing on problems and less news coverage on strategic issues. Spain and Sweden are notable exceptions to this dichotomy as the former focuses on problems and has a low emphasis on stakeholders and strategy framing and the latter has less challenging news and more interpretive and actor-focused coverage.⁴⁵ Scholars argue that far-right political parties recruit people, who have deep feelings of political frustration and express their negative attitudes towards the political system.⁴⁶

PRR parties, likewise, advocate halting the immigration process⁴⁷ since their anti-immigrant views are expressed by far-right constituents. Empirical research indicates that there are stronger ideological and party affiliations among people with greater levels of political participation and awareness⁴⁸ and well-structured political views.⁴⁹ Moreover, younger and older voters and people with less education are more vulnerable to populist right-wing campaigns. In seven nations, support for far-right parties grew closer to the election date, with the exceptions of Austria, Belgium, and Finland. This rise was around 2% in France, the Netherlands, and Sweden, while it was around 10% in Hungary, Italy, and the UK, in 2018.⁵⁰

Overall trends suggested that a smaller number of voters supported far-right parties in Austria and Belgium, while the number of far-right supporters has doubled in Hungary, Italy, and the UK. A significant increase was also observed in the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, and France.⁵¹ These trends added to the increasing influence of media populism on the growing presence of far-right parties in European parliaments. Such dependence on media sources can change individual preferences even during the last month of an election campaign, thus, increases the tendency to vote for far-right parties.⁵² Furthermore, the emerging trends of right-wing populism provide a deeper understanding of existing trends and their dominant styles.⁵³ In

arbitrated political performances, political actors mobilize features of 'kind' rather than merely 'content' as indices of social values convincing construction of social identity with fewer values or empirical veracity. Mainstream politicians can adopt a populist political style while maintaining a non-populist agenda.⁵⁴ The media justification that focuses on identical stylistic preferences characterized by the populist communicative style, increased emotionality, dramatization, and use of the colloquial language, takes anti-establishment positions, thus, raising newsworthiness.⁵⁵

Conclusion

It has been observed by various studies that PRR parties do not change government policies substantially, either directly or indirectly.⁵⁶ Scholars searching for the political roles of parties emphasize that mainstream right-wing parties have an electoral incentive to shift towards a conservative stance on migration.⁵⁷ Similarly, some analysts contend that the politicization of immigration comes from established parties and the impact of far-right agenda-setting is minimal.⁵⁸ In this context, the changes in migration policy resulting from the conventional right cabinets and their predefined policy agendas, remain restrictive.⁵⁹ The empirical evidence also reveals that the structural foundations of western democracy, such as pluralism and minority rights, are at risk.⁶⁰

There is no single actor or group of actors canvassing on a particular public issue as a security threat. Rather numerous actors work to convince each other and their peers to pursue a certain course of action. Individual actors can take on either a persuasive or enabling role. However, they can take on both roles simultaneously or change their roles over time. Public opinion, in the process, is significant, but it is not easily observable. It has been argued that the interpretation of public opinion is what matters most, but considering such knowledge could also enrich the perception of public opinion. Measuring public opinion, for instance, on citizenship vs. immigration helps to analyze its evolution at various periods, which can be associated with the impact of PRR parties.

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